NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE WESTERN REGION SUPPLEMENT 10-2004
APPLICABLE TO INSTRUCTION NWSI 10-518
NOVEMBER 10, 2004

Operations and Services
Public Weather Services, NWSI 10-5
Non-Weather Related Emergency Products Specification 10-518

WESTERN REGION RESPONSE PLAN FOR WEATHER SUPPORT DURING OIL AND HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCE RELEASES

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OPR: W/WR1x3 (J. Lorens) **Certified by:** W/WR1 (R. Douglas)
Type of Issuance: Initial

SUMMARY OF REVISIONS: This supplement supersedes Regional Operations Manual Letter (ROML) W-6-98 filed with WSOM Chapters C-49, D-51 and E-05.

Signed 11/03/04
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1. Description: In the event of an oil or hazardous substance release within the Western Region's area of responsibility, Weather Forecast Offices (WFOs) and River Forecast Centers (RFCs) may be requested to provide hydrometeorological support to agencies responsible for containment and cleanup of the substance, protection of property, or evacuation of threatened areas. Instructions covering actions to be taken when support is requested will be included in Station Duty Manuals. If the request for services is significant and likely to extend over several days, necessary extra personnel should be scheduled.

All contingencies cannot be covered in a uniform set of instructions, e.g., a spill impacting both an inland and coastal area, perhaps including release of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere; a release affecting adjacent areas of responsibility of two forecast offices; or an inland spill requiring both meteorological and hydrological support. Each office concerned must exercise sound judgment and initiative when responding to a spill incident. Actions should be coordinated with other appropriate field offices and with Western Region Headquarters, Meteorological Services Division (WRH, MSD) and/or Hydrology and Climate Services Division (HCSD).

Western Region Headquarters should be informed as soon as possible when support services during an oil or hazardous substance release are provided, as per NWSI "Notification of Significant Weather/Flood Related and Emergency Events and Requirements for Written Reports". At the conclusion of the incident, a written report, summarizing events and support provided, will be forwarded to WRH, MSD and/or HCSD.

2. Format and Procedures.

2.1 Regional Response Teams and the NOAA Response Plan: Regional Response Teams (RRT) for marine and inland releases include membership from Federal, state, and local agencies. These interagency groups meet at approximately six-month intervals to clarify response actions and may convene during drills and release incidents, particularly major ones. NWS MICS, HICs and WR Headquarters should attend these meetings, as appropriate.

2.2 Operational Responsibilities:

COASTAL WATER RELEASES

United States Coast Guard (USGS)

The USCG is the primary Federal agency responsible for cleanup of coastal and navigable water releases, and for actions necessary to minimize their threat to the environment and society. The Coast Guard provides the designated On-scene Coordinator who coordinates all efforts by Federal, state, and local agencies in combating the spill. Coast Guard district areas of responsibility in the Western Region are:

a. Eleventh District, Headquarters in Long Beach - Mexican border to the mouth of the Santa Maria River.

b. Twelfth District, Headquarters in San Francisco - Mouth of the Santa Maria River to the California/Oregon border.

c. Thirteenth District, Headquarters in Seattle - California/Oregon Border to the Canadian Border.

NOAA

Several NOAA line offices have support roles during coastal and navigable water spills and releases. The scientific support coordinator is the point of contact provided by National Ocean Service (NOS), Hazardous Materials Response Branch (HAZMAT). HAZMAT is also responsible for providing pollutant trajectory modeling services.

NWS

The NWS is responsible for providing forecast support to agencies involved in coastal and navigable water spill mitigation activities. Also involved are the Coast Guard On-scene Coordinator and the NOAA Scientific Support Coordinator. This function is critical because of the importance of meteorological data and forecasts as input to surface trajectory models and the influence of weather on spill containment actions. Aircraft and vessel operations are also a major component of spill mitigation activities, especially during major spills, and require detailed meteorological support. Requests for NWS support will normally originate within the RRT or the NOAA Scientific Support Coordinator's office.

WFOs with marine responsibilities will maintain a state of operational readiness to respond to coastal releases in their areas of responsibility. Requests will usually be for site-specific forecasts of wind, sea conditions, ceiling, visibility, temperature, and precipitation. Detailed wind forecasts required to drive trajectory models and real-time data observations may also be requested. If the spill is likely to persist for several days, an expeditious communications channel should be set up with the USCG or NOAA personnel at the site of the spill. Forecast release times and user needs should be worked out with the requestor.

For major releases, an incident meteorologist (IMET) may be requested to work with the Coast Guard On-Scene Coordinator and NOAA Scientific Support Coordinator. The IMETs functions include:

a. Preparation of forecasts working from a WFO or on-scene with an All Hazards Meteorological Response System (AMRS), depending upon which mode of operation provides the best support;

b. Interpretation and refinement of forecasts provided by a distant WFO if deemed the most appropriate means of support;

c. Provision of feedback to the WFO;

d. Assistance in interpreting trajectory model output based on meteorological input;

e. Briefings for aviation and vessel support activities; and

f. Participation in NOAA briefings for the on-scene coordinator.

The request for on-site meteorologist service must originate with the Coast Guard On-scene Coordinator or NOAA Scientific Support Coordinator but may come to a field office from within the NWS. The MIC will then administer requests for an IMET/AMRS dispatch via procedures defined in NWSI 10-402. If detailing an on-site meteorologist would have an adverse impact on the WFO operations, use of overtime is authorized, or an IMET from another WFO may be detailed to the spill site.

Offices are authorized to disseminate emergency response messages, to the public and marine interests whenever a spill poses an immediate threat to human life and property, via all appropriate means, including NOAA All Hazards Radio and NOAA Weather Wire Service. Requests for dissemination may come from the Coast Guard, NOAA RRT representative, or the Scientific Support Coordinator. Routine information regarding spill movement, spreading, or possible damage to the environment are not to be publicly disseminated.

INLAND SPILLS/RELEASES

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

The EPA is the primary Federal agency responsible for cleanup and mitigation of hazardous spills and releases affecting lakes, rivers, and inland waterways. The EPA provides the designated on-scene coordinator who coordinates all efforts of Federal, state, and local agencies in combating the spill.

EPA areas of responsibility in the Western Region are:

a. Region VIII, Headquarters in Denver - Montana and Utah.
b. Region IX, Headquarters in San Francisco - California, Nevada, and Arizona.

c. Region X, Headquarters in Seattle - Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

NWS

River Forecast Centers will maintain a state of operational readiness necessary to respond to requests for hydrologic services to support cleanup and other mitigation activities during inland spills. These services may include assessments of current river and streamflow conditions, flow velocity forecasts (where available), as well as discharge forecasts. Streamflow information may require coordination with the appropriate regulatory agency such as the Corps of Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamation.

Use of NOAA All-Hazards Radio and NOAA weather wire service and any other means of communication is authorized for dissemination of emergency response messages when an inland spill poses an immediate threat to human life and property.

AIR RELEASES

Requests for weather support in cases of air spills or releases of hazardous substances may originate from any level of government or from industry, e.g., a chemical factory.

NWS

The NWS is responsible for providing support in connection with spills or releases of hazardous substances into the atmosphere. These are usually short-fuse incidents involving release of a toxic chemical into the atmosphere. However, instances of releases extending over several hours or days can occur.

MICs should inform appropriate local government and disaster agencies of weather services, available from their offices, which can assist them during hazardous air spills and releases. Notification procedures can then be established to expedite rapid requests and responses for weather support during such emergencies.

The responsible government agency, usually law enforcement departments at the city or county level, may contact the NWS to request support for assessing the danger of a release and ordering evacuation of downwind areas. This will often include current and predicted:

a. Surface and low level winds;
b. Air mass stability and mixing depth;
c. Inversion conditions (height, intensity, time of formation and breakup);
d. Weather phenomena (especially precipitation).
e. If appropriate, WFOs may initiate emergency requests to the NCEP Senior Duty Meteorologist to provide a special run of HYSPLIT as per the procedures outlined in NWSI 10-518.

The requested services are to be provided in a timely manner, commensurate with the degree of danger to life and property. The response must be immediate in many cases, possibly even requiring suspension of routine duties. In cases of extended releases of toxic materials, routine support forecast issuance times should be established with the requestor.

Offices are authorized to broadcast state warnings of a public threat to life and property posed by a toxic air release over NOAA All-Hazards Radio and disseminate via NOAA weather wire service as per state warning dissemination agreements.